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ABSTRACT

Given the increasingly multi-ethnic school population and the lack of democratic political traditions in many students' cultural backgrounds, new ways to educate for citizenship are essential. The paper recommends developing multidisciplinary approaches to teaching civic identity and civic writing. It describes how a New Jersey school district introduced civic writing activities directly linked to local history and community issues, combining public and individual experiences with high school student commitment. The planning team agreed that the English, social studies, and science departments would work cooperatively to assess student research writing. They considered: topics that would address ways to build a sense of community within the student body; ways to develop participatory and responsible civic behavior; and methods of teaching skills, values, and attitudes to prepare students for the future. The multidisciplinary themes they chose were environmental issues, local history, and multicultural studies and global issues. Besides completing question-driven research projects, students were encouraged to participate in local community service projects. The article offers nine recommendations to help transform the current research process that relies on thesis writing into a viable question-driven design. It suggests that combining academic discourse with community service provides the social and political glue to enhance students' personal development with civic responsibility. (SM)

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TEACHING CIVIC IDENTITY AND CIVIC WRITING IN THE INFORMATION AGE

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Teaching Civic Identity and Civic Writing in the Information Age

Given an increasing multi-ethnic school population and the lack of democratic political traditions in many students' cultural backgrounds, new ways to educate for citizenship are essential. The responsibility for teaching civic identity and civic writing have far too long been regarded under the domain of the social studies curriculum. This formal isolation of civics within the social studies has been as ineffective as the all too recent formal isolation of reading and writing instruction in the language arts curriculum. We need to consider developing multidisciplinary approaches to admit students as members to a democratic community.

After returning from Harvard's Institute in Writing, Reading, and Civic Education, a group of Southern Regional High School District (Manahawkin, NJ 08050) teachers and administrators assessed current expectations and practices in teaching civic literacy. We concluded that if we were to move our school district toward a vision of students as citizens we needed to introduce civic writing activities directly linked to local history and community issues.

Although many schools are enhancing community service projects, we wanted to combine public and individual experiences with student commitment. For example, we hypothesized that writing letters to obtain information or services and writing letters to ask questions or express opinions to editors or public officials would serve to foster within students the same social responsibility and political participation achieved by adult citizens.

Sandra Stotsky, Director of the Institute on Writing, Reading, and Civic Education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, posits that "writing for academic purposes can stimulate the moral reasoning and the independent reading and thinking that lie at the heart of both academic study and responsible public

discourse." As a means or assimilation in the school and local community, civic writing activities focusing on local and community issues would also serve as an anchor -- a sense of place -- for present and future students.

In addition, our own research and reading of such texts as William Johnston's *Workforce 2000* and John Naisbitt's *Megatrends* influenced our curriculum planning. Essentially we have been told that we live in the Information Age, a brave new world whose language is transformed by networking, retrieval systems, and data bases. Amid a landscape of technological hardware and software, we can guarantee information delivery overnight, and we can provide immediate access to the information, if we fax it over fiber optic transmission lines or bounce it off satellite dishes. We therefore believed that in preparing students for the Information Age, civic writing would take on a critical role across disciplines by equipping students to meet the challenges of civic responsibility.

Indeed, we viewed connecting research to civic writing as a support strategy to provide current events information experiences for students to express their opinions to an audience of peers and adults. Through the processes of synthesizing and evaluating information collected from text and periodical readings to answer their own questions, students become advocates capable of persuading others to accept their solutions to a problem.

The Planning Stage

Unfortunately, most research experiences for students culminate in research papers with teaching time spent on how to write notecards and citations. We wanted to transform the current model of the research paper into a viable design based on student-generated questions, a design that would permit students to set a research agenda and to make the kind of choices real research writers make. Students could use the time spent shuffling bibliography cards instead to integrate information from

sources into personal language and to internalize the meaning of what they have read.

First, we philosophically agreed that the English, Social Studies, and Science departments would work cooperatively in assessing student research writing. While formal grammar and remedial writing instruction remained under the domain of the English department, specific writing modes such as persuasive and cause and effect writing would be emphasized in all departments through the use of varied content related topics. For the research paper, students would be give a general theme such as environmental protection issues and would then choose topics according to their own questions about the theme. We also concluded that it was an unnecessary practice to require students to produce 10 - 12 research papers before they graduated. By stressing the quality of research efforts and the necessity for teaching other writing modes, English, science, and social studies teachers worked cooperatively with students in helping them evaluate their writing proficiency across varied disciplines. These practices lead to a renewed use of team teaching, shared grading of student work, and an investigation for developing additional interdisciplinary projects.

For the second step our district published a *Guide to Writing Research Papers* that provided students with a self-directed process to conduct research and to frame questions using the revised Modern Language Association format. The *Guide* served to establish formal research procedures across disciplines. It was also necessary to publish our own guide because current texts and workbooks rely heavily on models based on thesis writing and documenting primary sources. By investigating a question rather than demonstrating a proof, we assumed that individual research based on inquiry would develop student confidence in knowledge acquired in this way.

We then evaluated our library and media center resources and soon discovered that they limited access to both broad and detailed information. In addition, after the

experiences of dramatic world-wide change in 1989, many of the texts and reference materials were inaccurate. If students are to become active participants in achieving civic responsibility, we need to provide them with access to timely information from a variety of sources that are not limited to regional newspapers or dated reference materials.

Using Newsbank (Newsbank, Inc., 58 Pine Street, New Canaan, CT 06840), a current events and issues resource of newspaper articles on microfiche grouped by subject, our students were able to focus their questions and draw upon articles from 100 newspapers across the country. The microfiche is updated monthly, which increased the accuracy of information, but the most critical feature was the facility with which students of all learning abilities were able to obtain a deep coverage of events, providing regional perspectives on national issues,making history a dynamic, living occurrence.

In order to plan possible multidisciplinary themes, a group of Southern's English, science, and social studies teachers met to consider topics that would answer the following questions:

> How do we build a sense of community within the student body?
>
> How do we develop participatory and responsible civic/political behavior?
>
> What skills, values, and attitudes do we teach to prepare students for the future?

Some of the multidisciplinary themes we selected included environmental issues, local history, and multicultural studies. These themes were selected not just because they could be found in other disciplines, but because they represented the needs of our own school and community.

Founded in 1957 as a regional high school district, Southern Regional houses

240 teachers and 2500 students in grades 7 through 12. Located at the New Jersey shore and within the New Jersey Pinelands, a rich ecological forest preserve, many of our students recently moved to one of the five communities within this district, a district whose school population is projected to double within five years. In the midst of this dramatic population change, we envisioned that question-driven research, focusing on the local community especially, would increase students' knowledge and appreciation of local history, stimulate them to explore current civic issues, and aid them in managing the future.

Implementation Strategies

For the first multidisciplinary theme we began with environmental issues in tenth grade. This was not only a sound content choice for humanities and science courses, but also a strong community concern because of our precious shore environment. The pollution of several East Coast beaches brought the value of student research questions close to home. Students wrote letters to obtain information from local business leaders, local and state representatives, teachers, professors, and local and national environmental organizations in order to seek answers to personal questions about what would be the best course of action for the future environmental protection of the community and state. Some of the student-generated questions included:

> What are the effects of the depletion of the ozone layer in New Jersey? in my community?
>
> What evidence is there that ocean dumping threatens our survival?
>
> How has the local business community (or East Coast communities) been affected by negative medial reports concerning ocean pollution?
>
> What are the effects of acid rain in my community? in New Jersey?

After students selected their research question and wrote personal letters requesting information on environmental protection issues, they initiated a data base

search using the Newsbank Information Index that enabled them to broaden or to narrow the focus of their inquiry. Just in our most recent data base, there are over 1,600 articles on microfiche concerning environmental issues. After placing the microfiche in a reader, students scan for details or other possible topics and photocopy applicable articles.

No longer were our students frustrated by the lack of timely information and the search through volumes of Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature. Instead, they began to make comparisons, analyzed points of view, drew their own conclusions and make choices to select regional, national or international perspectives on their research problems. The generation of questions by tenth grade students, and their incorporation into civic writing for obtaining information, initially satisfied our objectives of enhancing civic identity and developing responsible civic/political behavior.

In grade 11, in the traditional combined American Literature and History class, students formulated research questions which explored local history by asking who lived in their communities before the students arrived. Using oral/videotaped biographies, interviews, questionnaires, and archaeological digs, the students investigated questions about everyday life and past cultures. Their research questions focused on a range of topics, including local heroes, styles of architecture, education, law enforcement, transportation, popular music, sports, and the effect of hurricanes. As a result of three student projects, our main hall now contains detailed displays of before-and-after photography of local towns in the area served by our regional school.

Researching primary documents on file at local historical societies and libraries, in order to discover descriptive and historical materials, also proved helpful in understanding their new communities' folklore and myths. The use of primary documents, however, did not require investigation of the far distant past. Several students were fascinated with the 1960s, for example, and wanted to research

questions concerning Southern Regional High School's teachers and students during that decade. Using yearbooks, school newspapers, local papers and interviews with teachers and parents, students were able to answer their questions about the interactions and norms of their school community in that period and draw comparisons to current student issues and community concerns. Another group of students chose to research the first Earth Day Celebration, interviewed teachers and alumni, and read newspaper and yearbook accounts. Their work was featured during the 20th anniversary of Earth Day and served to provide a frame of reference for current community environmental concerns.

In the senior year, we turned to national/global affairs and multicultural studies as the focus for student-generated questions. Students selected one book to read from a list of novels and historical fiction which focused on the theme of community, and each student formulated questions based upon his or her reading. Some of the literature included: *The Federalist Papers*, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Richard Wright's *Native Son*, Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men*, Abraham Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address" and "Second Inaugural Address," Henrik Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*, and Dorris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*. The literature thus served as the prompt to assist students with personalizing questions for a formal research paper.

The senior paper was designed to be a comparative study in which students might review two sides of a controversial issue or compare different people, trends, and/or events. If they researched opposing viewpoints, students were asked to take a position based on their own new understanding and knowledge. It was at this point that they would move beyond their original level of inquiry and become advocates capable of persuading others of their beliefs.

In conjunction with the research project, we emphasized local community service projects more strongly. Among other activites, seniors telephoned people to

encourage them to vote, attended Board of Education meetings, helped in local and school recycling efforts, and took part in student-organized charity events and entertainment for senior citizens, elementary school children, and the local hospital. We believed these projects helped students by personalizing civic relationships, by heightening their sense of commitment to their community, and by giving them a genuine opportunity to try out ideas. As a result of our new emphasis, student membership has tripled in service organizations such as the Interact and Key Clubs. Indeed, we are in our fourth year with an active Amnesty International Club founded and organized by students.

Personal Assessment

One of my favorite examples of assessing the worth of a multidisciplinary approach to civic writing occurred with our English as a Second Language students. For our ESL students representing 12 different cultures, it was Charles Dickens' "The Christmas Carol" that initiated a lesson in civic responsibility. After an English class discussion of Ebenezer Scrooge's renewal and return to community, one of our ESL students brought the literature into her social studies lesson and asked what could be done to create a world where there would be no more suffering children like Tiny Tim. For some of these students who fled oppression in Central America and grew up in Cambodian camps, there was a distinct desire to learn how to make a difference for children in need.

The ESL students chose hunger as the major problem facing children, and they wrote letters to obtain information from legislative leaders and agencies involved in hunger relief efforts. When UNICEF was selected, the students wrote a letter requesting information to assist the world's children. The most wonderful lesson came not from the efforts of these students, many of whom live well below the poverty line, as they collected money and support from students and community members, but rather

from the realization that this was the first time our ESL students taught us how much we needed them to remind us that the local community is a major resource for developing participation and civic behavior. Their civic writing in action reaffirmed what they learned form Charles Dickens that people learn and grow from the group or community with whom they live.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are provided as suggested methods to transform the current research process that relies on thesis writing into a viable question-driven design. As guidelines, they are applicable to the changing needs of the Information Age and the new technology (CD Roms, laser discs, data base searches, and video cameras) available now to schools.

1. Teach students to develop and frame questions for research investigation. First, teachers need to be trained to employ strategies for generating student questions. Use double-entry notebooks, journals, and literature logs to enkindle ideas derived from readings and discussion. Prereading and prewriting activities are most suitable for students to gain experience in framing questions for further study. Francis Hunkins offers several other strategies to help students ask their own questions (*Social Education*, April 1985).
2. Whenever possible, make the research paper a multidisciplinary project. Whether their questions are bound by international, national, state, or community issues, the students can share in a special school community project which transcends the social studies classroom and connects it with English, science, and other curricular areas. In order to do this, teachers and administrators must work together to identify multidisciplinary themes, to communicate grading procedures to students and parents for research project work, and to evaluate this method of knowledge

acquisition.

3. Design research experiences where students can conduct investigations in small teams. Who says the research paper must always be an individual student project? Behind every great leader, inventor, or scientist is a team of researchers who learn from each other through the processes of testing hypotheses and/or replication. With any research topic, working with peers collaboratively will offer an opportunity to enhance learning and advocacy. Local history projects and community and state issues serve as affordable vehicles for team research.
4. Beyond primary sources, let students conduct interviews, surveys, archaeological digs, and questionnaires. Even in the Information Age, the best solution to student questions may not be found in data bases or literature searches.
5. Encourage students to write letters to obtain information from a variety of sources including government officials, businesses, international organizations, college professors, and school teachers. Students will need to learn how to evaluate and synthesize this information.
6. Develop processes for research papers to become tangible products such as videotapes, local history photo exhibits, and classroom magazines that feature student abstracts of their work and/or responses to their letters requesting information from legislative leaders. Students can, as a result, share their accomplishments beyond their classrooms and with adults.
7. When the papers and projects are finished, develop a public forum where student work can be shared and discussed. For example, some of our tenth grade students present key points from their environmental protection research to their peers and community members in a public forum. The forum

permits students to share their solutions and ask further questions.

8. When applicable, another possible forum especially designed for senior students can go beyond the realm of the school and community when students write letters, attaching an abstract of their paper, to local and state representatives advocating adoption of their research findings. Students may even connect their personal analysis to current bills of legislation.
9. Publish the best papers and/or display the best projects to serve as models for students. We all need examples to emulate and benchmarks to encourage and to question.

The time is right to consider varied multidisciplinary approaches toward a vision of developing civic identity and civic writing. Question-driven research is but one method which through the active processes of writing, thinking, and advocacy will prepare students to participate effectively in the challenges of the Information Age. Based upon our results at Southern Regional, students and colleagues demonstrate a renewed commitment toward writing for an audience and a shared responsibility toward respecting diverse opinions. Combining academic discourse with community service provides the social and political glue to enhance students' personal development with civic responsibility.

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